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Philadelphia Inquirer Article 6 May 84

CLASSIFICATION

Unclassified

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6-352

U.S. presence is growing in Latin region

"The sky's the limit" for the CIA in its effort to discourage communist expansion, says Rep. Bill Goodling.

James McCartney
Inquirer Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON— The U.S. military buildup in Central America has become a massive display of U.S. military power, both overt and covert, in the days preceding today's presidential election in El Salvador.

On the overt side, more than 34,000 U.S. military men were involved, as of yesterday, in three separate sets of military exercises in or near Central America.

But covert activities also have grown in recent months as the election has approached. According to congressional sources with access to intelligence information, they now include a variety of CIA operations, plus deep involvement of Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine special forces. Those sources cite the following:

- The CIA is supporting between 15,000 and 20,000 Latin Americans fighting a two-front war against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

- At least 1,000 Americans are involved directly in clandestine activities in the Nicaragua-Honduras-El Salvador area and the number might run as high as 3,000. The precise figures are highly classified.

- The presence of special forces of various branches of the U.S. military in El Salvador has effectively boosted the number of U.S. military advisers to about 110. Administration spokesmen continue to insist that President Reagan is observing a self-imposed 55-adviser limit.

The congressional sources also confirmed that the CIA masterminded air strikes in February on Nicaraguan targets, including a radio transmitter and a military camp, and the mining of Nicaraguan harbors. Specially trained Latin American commandos staged the raids. That same pattern was followed in October, when CIA-trained Latin commandos attacked a main oil center in Nicaragua.

According to Rep. Bill Goodling (R., Pa.), a member of the House Intelligence Committee, the basic objective of the CIA campaign is not, as Reagan repeatedly has asserted, to interdict the flow of supplies from Nicaragua to Salvadoran guerrillas.

Goodling said CIA representatives have told the committee many times in closed sessions that the principal aim of the campaign is to cripple the Nicaraguan government.

He said the CIA and its allies want to force the Nicaraguan government to "turn inward" in order to discourage any effort at further communist expansion in Central America. And Congress, he said, has given the CIA a "green light" to go ahead in almost any way it wishes.

"The sky's the limit," Goodling said.

There is also evidence that U.S. military exercises in and around Central America are a part of a secret military buildup intended to make it possible in the future to send U.S. troops there easily and quickly if that should be considered necessary.

Officially, Reagan has denied that the huge program of exercises has any special meaning.

Asked about the exercises at a news conference April 4, he said: "I think these maneuvers are something we've done before. They're not something unusual or aimed at anyone down there ... all they are is war games."

But the Pentagon's news releases on the exercises suggest otherwise.

A news release issued March 23 announcing exercise Grenadier I, now under way in Honduras, said it was designed to "enhance our abilities and techniques to conduct multinational regional military operations." More than 1,000 U.S. combat troops are participating and will stage an airborne infantry assault with Honduran troops.

The administration officially denies that it has developed contingency plans for sending U.S. combat troops to Central America. But congressional aides point out that the exercises already under way are, in fact — and as Pentagon press releases have made clear — contingency plans.

Congressional sources have now made it possible to piece together the major elements of the administration's military policies in Central America. On the covert side, those elements include the following:

- At La Union, on El Salvador's coast on the Gulf of Fonseca, 17 members of the Seventh Army Special Forces Group, Third Battalion, are helping to train Salvadorans in interception techniques on the gulf as part of an effort to stop the flow of arms from Nicaragua to El Salvador's guerrillas. With them are seven members of Navy Special Warfare Group 2, experts in clandestine warfare. The CIA is involved at La Union, but in what numbers is unknown. In the overall program, the CIA and service-connected special forces are training Salvadorans and Hondurans in clandestine operations in a sizable secret war against Nicaragua.

- At Tiger Island, in the Gulf of Fonseca, another U.S. base for clandestine activities was established in 1983. A key feature is a U.S. Marine Corps radar listening post that monitors traffic on the gulf. CIA agents working from the island planned and directed October's attack on Nicaragua's major oil facilities at Corinto by Latin Americans using speedboats.

- CIA agents are taking a direct role in training and equipping guerrilla forces fighting the Nicaraguan government. The two major CIA operations involve support of *contras* — counterrevolutionaries — who have proclaimed their aim of bringing down the Sandinista government.

One is the now widely publicized guerrilla drive that is based in Honduras and has forces numbering between 15,000 and 18,000, twice the size of a year ago. It is a conservative force that includes some former army officers of the Somoza dictatorship. A Honduran air base near Aguacate is believed to be the center of CIA activities in Honduras.

A less widely publicized CIA effort is support of another *contra* group operating from Costa Rica and commanded by Eden Pastora, a one-time Sandinista who defected. The size of this force is unknown, but some estimates run up to 1,500.

The United States also is providing direct reconnaissance, involving U.S. soldiers, for the Salvadoran army in its battle with guerrillas.

The U.S. Army's 224th Military Intelligence Battalion, about 300 strong, operating from the Palmerola air base in Honduras, is flying reconnaissance missions over guerrilla positions in El Salvador and relaying information to the Salvadoran army.

The United States also is maintaining electronic spy ships, radar-equipped Navy frigates, off the shores of Central America in both the Pacific and the Caribbean, to monitor arms shipments to and from Nicaragua. Somewhere in those same seas are

CIA mother ships that have directed attacks on the Nicaraguan harbors and possibly other targets.

Meanwhile, the administration is seeking to continue a buildup of military facilities in Honduras that has caused some U.S. representatives and senators to contend that the administration is leading the country toward war.

Facilities created in Honduras now include eight air strips capable of handling troop and cargo-carrying transport planes and four base camps, all ostensibly built for U.S. military exercises in the region.

But Sen. James Sasser (D., Tenn.), who has made detailed studies of the U.S. buildup in Honduras, has observed that sufficient facilities have now been built to deploy the U.S. 82d Airborne Division in less than a day.

Sasser and others believe that the Honduran buildup is, in fact, part of a covert U.S. plan to prepare for possible introduction of U.S. troops in the area.

As for the overt U.S. activities in the region, the congressional sources say three major exercises are now under way:

- Ocean Venture '84, involving more than 30,000 U.S. military personnel, opened April 20 in the Straits of Florida, the Gulf of Mexico, the South Atlantic, the Caribbean and the United States itself.

- Grenadier 1, involving about 3,500 military personnel, operates from two Honduran bases — Cucuyagua Air Base, about 20 miles from the Salvadoran border, and Jamastran Air Base, the same distance from the Nicaraguan border.

- King's Guard. It involves about 500 U.S. military personnel working with forces of El Salvador and Honduras in and around the Gulf of Fonseca. The exercise began April 26 and is to end tomorrow, the day after the Salvadoran presidential runoff election.

U.S. buildup in Central America

